Food Allergies

We’ve all heard about them: food allergies. Everyone is familiar with allergies, but how are food allergies different than other allergies? [Insert name here], County Extension Agent, says apart from the obvious understanding that they are caused by food, food allergies can range from being moderately uncomfortable (like seasonal allergies) to suddenly life threatening (like a bee sting allergy). Food allergies are becoming more and more prevalent in our society; as such it’s important to make sure we understand what they are.

Food allergies are a result of a reaction that the immune system has with certain foods. These foods stimulate immunoglobulin E, which then causes: hives, difficulty breathing, diarrhea, vomiting, and/or fainting. Serious reactions can cause shock and irregular heart beat, and can lead to death. Many individuals use the words intolerance and allergy interchangeably, but this is incorrect. Food intolerances are typically caused by a lack of proper enzymes in your body to use specific parts of food; whereas food allergies affect the immune system, and can be much more severe.

Now, not all foods are created equal. Some foods are more likely to cause an allergic reaction than others. A list of the top six foods that cause allergies are: milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soy, and tree nuts.

It should also be known that specific food allergies are not contagious, nor are they inheritable. However, if a parent has a food allergy, then their child has a higher risk of developing a food allergy in general (not mom or dad’s specific allergy).

Unfortunately, food allergies are not curable, and the best strategy is complete avoidance. The FDA has mandated that products that contain allergenic ingredients be labeled as such, and many companies will label products that are even processed in the same building as allergenic materials. Explain to children that have allergies to not accept food from friends, explain allergies to teachers and other adults, and be prepared for accidental exposures by wearing medical alert bracelets/necklaces and carrying an epinephrine injector.

If you or someone you know would be interested in more information, please contact your local Texas AgriLife Extension Service County Extension Agent at [Insert contact information here].
You can also visit the following links: The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network at
www.foodallergy.org or the Food and Drug Administration
www.fda.gov/Food/FoodSafety/FoodAllergens/default.htm.